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The English Leaflet

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TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY MEETING

The following program has been arranged with the hope that this meeting may be outstanding in the history of the Association.

Friday, March 12, 4:00 P.M. General Session in Emerson
• D, Harvard University

How to Develop Literary Appreciation

Discussion by members of the seminar of Mr.
Charles Swain Thomas, Harvard University

Some Paradoxes of "Creative" Writing. Address by
Professor Robert M. Gay, Simmons College

6:30 P.M. Dinner at the Harvard Union

Addresses, Professor Greenough and Professor Lowes,
Harvard University

Address, Sir John Adams, Professor Emeritus of Educational Theory, University of London

(Reservations for the dinner should be sent at once to Professor F. W. C. Hersey, Harvard University. Price per plate, \$1.60)

Saturday, March 13, 9:30 A.M. Sectional Meetings

Section for Elementary Teachers, Hall of Boston Public Library

Section for High Schools, Prince School, Exeter and Newbury Streets

Section for Normal Schools, Prince School, Exeter and Newbury Streets

Section for Colleges, Prince School, Exeter and Newbury Streets

11:00 A.M. General Session in Hall of Boston Public Library

Address, *Recent Action and Policy of the College Entrance Examination Board, with Special Reference to English.* Discussion

Address, *The Problem of Individual Differences,*
Professor Sterling A. Leonard, University of Wisconsin

1:00 P.M. Anniversary Luncheon, Hotel Brunswick
Talks by charter members and former officers

(Reservations, at \$1.60 per plate, should be sent at once to Mr. Orren H. Smith, 92 E. Wyoming Avenue, Melrose, Massachusetts)

SOME EDUCATIONAL IMPEDIMENTS TO INTEREST IN READING AND WRITING

WARWICK BARSE MILLER

Providence, Rhode Island

Our Association has long been keenly interested in the attitudes of students toward their English work in school and colleges. In the article which follows we have an individual reaction that many observers will regard as typical. The author, a very recent graduate of one of our New England colleges, is now seriously engaged in learning more about this interesting game of writing. He frankly confesses that his English work was not particularly stimulating, and yet his interest could so easily have been aroused. Perhaps we have in our classes pupils who are lethargic simply because we are negligent.

—The Editor

I

In the frequent reflections which it is the happy fortune of a writer to indulge in, I have often paused to examine the reasons why my classmates and I, during our school and university careers, were not inspired with a more decided interest in reading and writing. And as the next logical step in my thoughts, such examination has quite naturally suggested a few forces which, if exerted, might have stimulated this interest.

The attraction to literary pleasures, I have already characterized as "decided," but perhaps I can designate the type I mean more specifically by contrasting it with the attitude we assumed. In my own case, the will to read and write has always been congenial to my nature. Not until I was nineteen, though, was my zest in these two occupations excited to the definite intensity it should have been, in consideration of my natural desire to write. The disposition of my classmates towards English was that of the average student. However, it is a genuine, subjective interest in reading and writing which I believe the English departments of the country are striving to awaken, and it is this quality of interest the impediments suppressed.

I shall commence by stating a few facts about my character, which may be of value to teachers and professors in their effort to understand the pupil's mind. One very peculiar phenomenon was that though I found increasing enjoyment in writing a theme or browsing through a library,

I never once considered the possibility of my becoming an author or of even being endowed with literary predilections. In early years the greatness of authorship filled me with the rather stupid humility that a serf feels for his lord. To me authors were persons with such tremendous and mysterious powers that any vague tendency I had to affiliate myself with their activity seemed absurd. It is impossible not to feel some shame in confessing these lowly thoughts when I now profess to be following the noble course of literature. Part of my being may have been dormant. For later, towards the close of my high-school education, as the ego of youth budded into flower, the pendulum swung quite the other way, and I was seized with the most extravagant hopes of joining the enchanting ranks of the literati. However, the early illusion undoubtedly retarded my literary talent.

A slight domestic episode, too, I have always felt had a discouraging influence upon my development as a writer. When I was thirteen years old I passed an afternoon writing short lines under each other, with a bit of crudely manufactured rhyme mixed in to make the whole appear like poetry, and proudly announced to my parents my intention of becoming a poet. They, however, regarded the matter as a childish fancy, and I shortly forgot my intention, with the result that my poetic flame sadly flickered out. Now, I have always believed that if someone had started right then to read poems to me every day until my mind might have been so filled with the spirit of poetry that I should have been stimulated to further attempts in verse, the flame might have been fanned into a lasting one. For in spite of my scribble's being no more than I describe it, I had, nevertheless, been moved to express my thoughts in metrical form.

I come now to my classmates. There is, I find, but one main reason why they were not more interested in reading and writing; and from further observation I believe it holds true with all students. My classmates regarded both processes as tasks. As it is impossible for any human being to experience genuine interest in what he looks upon as a task, my classmates naturally could not feel any strong leaning towards English. I cannot exempt myself from being guilty of this indolent attitude, but, unlike the effect upon my fel-

low students, composition and literature reacted upon me in stimulating my zeal for outside reading. Most of my time away from classes I spent in reading books which had no bearing on my course, and my assigned reading I skimmed over with the sole object of getting it out of the way. In the works of Dickens, Lord Lytton, Scott, Hugo, Dumas, and others, which I read in high school; and those of German, French, Italian, and English authors which I read in college—if these had been required in my courses, I should probably not have found them so entertaining, and should have spent little time with them.

Such a desultory disposition is unfortunate, to say the least, and it is my opinion that not until something is done to eradicate it can an emphatic interest be awakened. In slightly lazy students it is certainly retarding, and with students of scant literary ability it is decidedly fatal.

I find there is a strange force of human nature causing this indolence. From childhood students begin to look upon all study only as a means to becoming educated, just as a person takes pills to get well. To them the arts and sciences are lumps of learning which public opinion induces them to become interested in for a certain number of years after which they may be forgotten. In college it was a surprise to discover that actually ninety-nine per cent of the students did not know why they were there except that "a college man had a better chance nowadays." They selected this subject or that one because they thought they "ought to know something about it." Freshman composition was all the writing that was necessary in the ingredients of an education, and English literature was studied so that the student could later talk about things that are worth while. In high school, subjects were studied because they were required by the entrance board of the university where the student intended to go. Rarely did it occur to a pupil to read beyond an assigned number of pages. If he did do such a thing he had a queer, almost ashamed feeling of being different from his classmates.

And this brings me to another human factor which held our interest suppressed, and which is handicapping teachers and professors in arousing an aptitude for study. It is well

known that the vast majority of individuals in the world are not intellectual, and are so jealous of a learned person they try to bring him down to their level by regarding him with disapproval. Unless this person has intellectual curiosity and vigor he will not like the feeling of being shut out from the majority, and in consequence he will yield to their stupid opinion. This explains why students pride themselves in nonchalantly creating the impression that they are really jolly old fellows no different from everyone else and never have been guilty of more than dabbling moderately in their studies. Only stalwart minds stand alone, for dogma is strong, and the herd instinct stronger. A student, when in the midst of a group of individuals of lower intellect who are teasing him about his education, will, it is sad to say, finally almost apologize for going to college. Thus, pupils in high school and college are handicapped by a fear of being too intelligent.

There was another discouraging influence to our interest, but it hardly demands more than cursory explanation. Everyone is familiar with the diverting pleasures of sports and social life in college. Suffice it to say that at my university the day consisted of student committee meetings, clappers, fraternities, moving pictures, and a great deal of jawing about all of these. Classes were interrupting nuisances to be endured with a stoic nature, and study a miserable thing to be indolently mauled over during chapel or five minutes before class.

Such, then, are some of the impediments to the awakening of our interest in reading and writing, and before I take up the second part of my reflections I might say that the disposition of students towards learning, which I have described, naturally tended to discourage the instructors, so that perhaps they decided to do their best for the diligent pupils and give up the lazy ones as hopeless.

II

I now come to those forces which might have stimulated our literary desires into definite activity. In selecting them I have been guided by a time-old principle—that the only possible way to interest a person in anything is to appeal

to his native tastes and ideals. A scientist is not apt to be interested in painting simply because he does not possess artistic leanings. Dickens did not write sophisticated society dramas simply because his innate ideals were for the humble people. This principle of appealing to native tastes can not help working efficiently when applied to English.

Every student, just as every author, writes best about that which he really enjoys. Why not, then, encourage students to write about the subjects which appeal most strongly to their predilections, and then show them how to express them in the clearest, most forceful way? If a pupil likes to talk about football games, fudge parties, the cowboy in the moving pictures, or girls, these are the wisest possible subjects he can choose for a theme. I remember I always gained distinct pleasure in describing mountain scenery, Shakespeare's characters (especially Portia and Bassanio), and the idiosyncracies of my acquaintances. Colorado mountains particularly fired my imagination, and though I had never been near them, my themes describing them received fairly good marks. I also had a stupid weakness for puns, which led to my turning out a theme voted as the most humorous one in the class.

A student obviously cannot be interested in knowing how to describe a hammer if he is not the least bit attracted by it. But if the teacher can get John, for instance, to write down the scene that he is so enthusiastically telling James about Tom's slipping on a banana peel just as he tipped his hat to Alice—if he can be asked to put this on paper exactly as he saw it, John will prove an apt student in learning how to narrate his incidents in the most effective English. And when a person finds he can do something with gratifying success he will want to do it again. Therefore, this system, carried up to the second year in high school, would not only establish a firm, lasting interest in writing, but it would also endow students with a clear conception of life's values.

Teachers, however, may object to these subjects as trivial. But, is it possible for a subject to be trivial? Doesn't its importance depend upon the writer's view of it? Teachers

should, therefore, encourage the widest possible range of choice.

In reading, this principle bases itself upon another indisputable principle—that many points in a given time do not impress the mind as deeply as a few points in the same time. Thus, young students are more impressed by long selections of literature covering a short period in its history, than by more selections of a longer period. I believe the interest in reading could be established during the students' early years if the teacher would read day after day from poems and novels enough to leave upon the mind a whole general effect. Their literary ear would become attuned, their taste developed, their imaginations stimulated, and they themselves would grow to look upon these classroom readings as enjoyable hours.

Short selections leave vague, blurred impressions on the mind. This may be taken as another reason why my classmates and I were not attracted to literature as an academic study; for I remember that it frequently annoyed me when the instructor began to read and arouse my interest, only to stop immediately. I felt like a young boy who takes a spoonful of ice cream only to have it taken away by someone. When complete outlines of things were given, my imagination had a total effect to cling to. My classmates and I did not appreciate the fact that the importance of passages lay in their relation to literary history. With this point in view, then, during the formative years of a student's life, the teacher should remember that it is not an interest in the history of literature which must be awakened, but interest in literature itself.

The plan I have outlined above, if continued also up until the second year in high school, would harness the student securely to literature, and from then on he would remember those pleasurable hours when he remained dreamily spellbound under the genius of Scott or Stevenson, and would be inspired to investigate literature of other periods in an effort to capture more of the same enjoyment.

In giving my reflections I do not feel the slightest reproach against teachers and professors for failing to arouse an emphatic interest among students in reading and writ-

ing. I only say that so long as there are forces preventing students from voluntarily becoming interested, the only alternative is for teachers and professors to find a way to awaken that interest.

ALTRUISM AND ENGLISH

GEORGE W. LEE

Librarian Stone & Webster, Inc., Boston

"The subject doesn't interest me in the slightest," observed two friends to whom this article was submitted before receiving its final tinkering. "All the more reason for bringing it to your attention and starting a campaign to interest you and millions of others," should have been my logical reply if only I had thought of it in time. And I might have added, "When ten lepers are cleansed only one of the ten has interest enough to express his gratitude." In other words, let us hope that the subject will interest at least a few of the masters of English.

This article concerns both commercial and intellectual life; for our language includes business English as well as literary English, and the problem is to arouse altruistic interest in the co-ordination of our resources for answering questions of usage. Throughout the land people are continually asking about the correctness of this expression or that. They feel uncertain on the shall-and-will series (What book will you want to read?), on "who" and "whom" ("Whom say ye that I am?"), on the salutation in a letter to a woman's organization (Dear Ladies?), on the complimentary close of letters to high officials (Yours respectfully?) and so forth. Most people with questions of this kind have a reference book or two; but the books do not answer every such question, and often the questioners challenge their authority. They want an authority that transcends the book; a council of four-and-twenty elders whose decisions they would respect as final.

What to do about it? Something is being done. In Boston we have taken a step in the recent establishment of a "Committee on Everyday English." At present the members of this committee are largely from colleges and other educational organizations of Boston and vicinity; but the intention

is soon to have an ex officio membership in which business interests shall be well represented. It has a dozen or so sub-committees to prepare material for discussion at its monthly sessions. The Boston Public Library is its headquarters; to which the public should send in their questions. Some of the questions already received have been answered offhand without being referred even to a sub-committee. Experiences thus far indicate the likelihood of much discussion, much careful thinking, and, in many instances, much research, before some of the more commonly asked questions are "officially" answered.

Experiences also indicate that this committee will have plenty of questions for appeal to an authoritative body. There is reason to believe that such a body will soon exist as a part of the American Academy of Arts and Letters; for, in 1916, Mrs. Evangeline Wilbour Blashfield presented the Academy with the sum of \$3,000 that it might be assisted to "determine its duty regarding both the preservation of the English language in its beauty and integrity, and its cautious enrichment by such terms as grow out of modern conditions." She added: "The Academy has the great advantage of being able to appeal to mature minds. It does not have to consider fledgling intelligence, as so many of our institutions are obliged to do. It possesses a certain authority and confers a certain distinction. Its conclusions would inspire respect."

What next? On Washington's birthday, 1917, there was a preliminary meeting of the Academy, organized by its Section of Letters, at which papers were read and discussed. At subsequent sessions more papers were read, with the result that in 1925 all were brought together in book form, published by Scribner, under the title "Academy Papers; Addresses on Language Problems by Members of the American Academy of Arts and Letters."

The contributors to this collection, in their order of entry in the book, are Paul Elmer More, William Milligan Sloane, William Crary Brownell, Brander Matthews, Bliss Perry, Paul Shorey, Henry Van Dyke, and Robert Underwood Johnson; all qualified to be members of a court of appeal on English; all names to conjure with, but with the conjurer yet to be made manifest. They seemed to agree that the

Academy should serve the best interests of the English language; though in discussing how to comply with the object of Mrs. Blashfield's gift their individualism, if not their cloistered scholarship, got the better of their altruism, no two being quite in accord on any working plan that was suggested, or, with one or two exceptions, appearing to reinforce the suggestions of others. They said things decidedly worth reading, however. Attention was called to the degeneracy of the English language, to the need for setting a good example in speaking and writing, to the need for seeing to the uniform growth of the language and for keeping out vulgarisms and localisms. The idea of a clearing house for teachers and writers was suggested. A small committee to prepare matters that might be discussed at semi-annual meetings of the committee of the whole, was suggested. One of the writers would leave the fundamentals of the language to the schools and colleges, as their natural duty, and have the Academy confine itself to papers on literary subjects, such as style, free verse, *et cetera*. Another referred to the French Academy as having theoretically the entire control of the French language, yet in practice never venturing to give orders; only registering what is already regarded as accepted usage.

The discussion still goes on; but I understand that in a year or so there are to be committee reports which will go far toward establishing the service of the Academy as the needed Court of Appeal on the use of English.

It should be noted that the organizers of our Boston committee have had misgivings not unlike those of the Academy of Arts and Letters. In discussing the plans one of the prospective members said in effect, "I will have nothing to do with it if this body sets itself up as an authority;" another would withdraw if we were not to recognize "American" English as distinctly worth while in contrast to "British" English; another would withdraw if we should so recognize it; while another was about to give up hope if we talked too much of plans and did not get down to business. We are glad to say this preliminary period is rapidly passing and that altruism, the consciousness of what we are needed for, is beginning to prevail. Would that other cities might establish like committees of their own and that all these committees

might be co-ordinated into a working whole. Then we should have our vexed questions well threshed out before appealing to the highest court.

But there are other resources. In Boston there is a lunch club of teachers of English, which meets monthly and presumably would be glad to receive questions that have proved puzzlers for the Committee on Everyday English. Then there is a New England association of teachers of English which meets semi-annually. Of course, there are plenty of chances to study English both in private and public classes. Boston abounds in these, and my attention has been called to opportunities for special instruction for people advanced in business who need to better themselves in their use of the English language. (Ask me more about this if interested.) "Ask your Public Library" should soon become the first impulse for all who are looking for community resources on this subject or any other. The existence of the new magazine entitled "American Speech," with which are identified many authorities in English, including members of the Academy of Arts and Letters, suggests the possibilities of a symposium, as also of special articles on questions that are not readily decided in local discussion. The magazine "Correct English," which has been published for many years, does an important work in providing lessons and answering questions for its subscribers. But, being largely the work of a single individual, it lacks that expression of minority opinion which means so much in matters intellectual.

There is hardly room here to mention books worth while on English usage. They are many, and to evaluate such books, and so help people decide which dictionary, which grammar, which book on business letter writing, to buy, is one of the things our Boston committee plans to do. "Constructive English" by Dr. Francis K. Ball is informally regarded as our guide; but we have to take exception when it would advise us to use as the complimentary close in writing to the mayor of Squeedunk, "I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant." "How to Write Business Letters," by John A. Powell, is an interesting book, which contains much good advice. But we are likely to take exception when it cites "Yours very truly" as the complimentary close in a letter to

the President of the United States. Between such extremes there are plenty of minor differences in these and countless other books, and to do them all justice will be a large undertaking.

Perhaps what is now needed more than anything else is publicity, a widely advertised invitation to use the Boston Public Library for all questions of English, with the understanding that questions not readily answered will find their way to the Committee, from whose recommendations we hope the public may soon be able to appeal to the Academy in its capacity of highest court.

The following bibliography is continued from the February issue :

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- Percy, Thomas *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*
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- Wilkinson, Marguerite *Contemporary Poetry*
- (To be continued)

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